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Contested Citizenship through Ethnic Naturalization in Gambela Regional State of Ethiopia

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to interrogate dynamics of contested citizenship through ethnic naturalization in Ethiopia, using Gambela Regional State for illustration. Gambela region of Ethiopia is a socio-political hotspot where issues of citizenship and ethnic identity intersect with historical grievances and modern migration dynamics. Ethiopia's federal system, which ties citizenship and political rights to ethnic identity, has created tensions in Gambela, a region known for its ethnic diversity and proximity to South Sudan. The process of ethnic naturalization where migrants or refugees integrate into local ethnic groups has often sparked disputes over land ownership, political representation, and access to resources. These challenges are exacerbated by the influx of South Sudanese refugees, whose alignment with indigenous or dominant ethnic groups has intensified local competition and conflict. Furthermore, ambiguities in national citizenship laws and their inconsistent application at the regional level have contributed to exclusionary practices and social fragmentation.

This article examines the historical, legal, and socio-political dimensions of contested citizenship in Gambela, highlighting the role of ethnic naturalization in shaping intergroup relations and governance. The study used qualitative research approach through document analysis of the existing secondary data such as conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature reviews. The article concluded by recommending policy reforms that build on shared needs and interests between citizens and refugees, strengthening institutions to tighten law that regulate refugees activities to be compliance with host country supreme law and create a situation that facilitate the formal naturalization of refugees according to the country constitution.

Keyword: Contested Citizenship, Refugees and Migration, Ethnic Naturalization in Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Citizenship has emerged as a focal point in political theory, encompassing a variety of interpretations. One aspect pertains to migration, which raises issues such as residence permits, voting rights, and the pursuit of asylum. Conversely, within a political community, there are concerns regarding the equitable treatment of citizens from diverse backgrounds (Iija 2011). The Center for the Study of Citizenship (CSC) defines citizenship as a form of membership within a community. This definition allows us to define our reach broadly, focus upon social inclusion as well as exclusion, and yet still fit the realm of citizenship (Merriam-Webstar Dictionary, 2025).

Citizenship represents a constitutional right conferred upon individuals by the laws of a nation, whether through birth, familial ties, marriage, economic status, naturalization, or legalization. This term serves to differentiate between citizens and non-citizens within the same national context. Nonetheless, there are instances where citizens of a sovereign state may identify themselves as natives or indigenous, while perceiving others as migrants. The question of who is a citizen and who is not is often fundamental in multi-ethnic states or multinational states, for that matter.

In multinational states like Ethiopia, the possession of citizenship can mean different things to different groups, including political power and the ability to enjoy the rights of citizens, such as the right to residence, the right to work, owning property, owning land, acquiring education, being married, and so on, as well as the duties of citizens (Fassil, 2020).

Since the introduction of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution in 1995, the concept of "indigenous" has been a source of significant debate in the Gambela region, where the local population shares historical ties with their South Sudanese neighbors. In contrast to the majority of Ethiopians, the people of Gambela, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Southern Omo exhibit distinct characteristics across various dimensions. Historically, migration has been an integral aspect of life for communities residing along Ethiopia's western borders. Nevertheless, the establishment of territorial boundaries and state frameworks during and following the colonial period, coupled with the reconfiguration of political and economic interests, has resulted in migration acquiring a notably political dimension (Regassa, 2010). Much of the scholarly discourse on citizenship emphasizes the dichotomy between indigenous populations and migrants, which has fostered a stratified and inequitable citizenship framework, frequently delineated along ethnic lines, with land ownership playing a crucial role in citizenship claims (Remula, 2016).

The experience of Gambela Regional State presents a compelling case study due to its unique demographic and settlement patterns. The region is home to a diverse population that includes people who identify as indigenous, migrants from various regions of Ethiopia, often referred to as highlanders, and refugees from South Sudan. The varied experiences of these distinct groups have led to the formation of communities that are deeply intertwined with ethnic identities, significantly influencing their sense of belonging and the interpretation of indigeneity. This dynamic has resulted in contested claims regarding political and indigenous rights. The situation is further complicated by the Ethiopian constitution, which prioritizes ethnicity as the foundation of citizenship, thereby fostering a framework of citizenship that is rooted in ethnic affiliations rather than civic principles (Dereje, 2011).

Ethiopia has historically been at the forefront of citizenship legislation in Africa, having established the continent's first formal citizenship law. This achievement can be linked to the country's longstanding local governance structures and its interactions with other nations, which have helped preserve its national identity over centuries (Fassil, 2020). The rulers of Ethiopia have recognized that sustaining the political identity of the populace is crucial for effective administration, governance, international relations, and the maintenance of sovereignty.

Citizenship laws are fundamentally grounded in two primary principles: *ius soli*, which refers to the right of the soil, granting citizenship to individuals born within a country's territory, and *ius sanguinis*, which pertains to the right of blood, allowing citizenship to be inherited from parents who are citizens of a specific nation (Kymlicka, 2000). Legal scholars have posited that citizenship encompasses three essential dimensions: the provision of legal status to individuals, the empowerment of individuals as political agents, and the establishment of community membership and identity. Consequently, the definition of citizens has been shaped by their experiences as subjects of states, resulting in a dual characterization of Ethiopians as both citizens and subjects during the imperial era (Fassil, 2020). It is therefore imperative for policymakers and relevant stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the informal means through which certain communities have obtained Ethiopian citizenship. This raises critical questions: What factors contribute to the contestation of citizenship in the Gambela Region? How does ethnicity play a role in facilitating informal integration within this area? What are the broader implications of the informal naturalization of refugees in Gambela Region of Ethiopia?

2. Literature Reviews

2.1 Citizenship/Nationality

This article employs the terms citizenship and nationality as synonymous, as they convey the same meaning within the Ethiopian context. This understanding of citizenship confers a certain degree of privilege and serves as a "link between a person and the state or an individual and a nation" (Beaman, 2016). Nevertheless, it is posited by many that citizenship transcends mere legal membership and encompasses a profound sense of belonging.

When individuals identify with a specific place or community, they may also develop heightened sense of responsibility for their actions within that social framework (O'Brien, 2011). Furthermore, citizenship is underpinned by a set of core values, including responsibility, respect, equality, helpfulness, justice, ethics, sensitivity, dedication, honesty, and freedom. These values manifest in various competencies such as participation, literacy, communication, problem-solving,

critical thinking, decision-making, cooperation, awareness, empathy, and inquiry (Gökçinar & Dere, 2024). However, as this article scrutinizes the legitimacy of citizenship acquisition in the Gambela region, it adopts a legal definition without delving into alternative interpretations. In this regard, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) provides a thorough legal framework for understanding the concept of citizenship. In the 1955 *Nottebohm* case, nationality is defined as follows:

According to the practice of States, to arbitral and judicial decisions and to the opinion of writers, nationality is a legal bond having its basis as a social fact of attachment, a genuine connection of existence, interest and sentiments, together with the existence of reciprocal rights and duties.

In this context, citizenship is characterized by a legal relationship, a meaningful connection to existence, and mutual rights and responsibilities. An Ethiopian legal scholar, Fasil Nahum, who authored the inaugural article on nationality law in Ethiopia, defines it as “the relationship of allegiance, protection and identification which an individual has with a state. Nationality is a status that results from both act and intent, and usually entails participation in the functions of the state (Fasil, 1997).”

According to Fasil, *Ius soli* and *Ius sanguinis* have become the principles with which many states determine nationality. Even though their theoretical classification is easy, their practical application is not as easy as one might assume. Some states use a compromise between the two, some adhere to one of them, and in a considerable number of nation states both principles are applicable. In this complex scenario, marriage is one of the determining variables. The complexity of nationality law has caught the attention of states. In 1930, there was a Hague Convention on conflict of nationality laws. This convention aspired to uniformity. Historian jurists like Fasil Nahum have stated that this convention served as a foundation for Ethiopia's 1930 nationality law, which helps explain the content and shape of the imperial nationality law (Fasil, 1997)..

2.2. Ethnicity, Informal Integration and Naturalization of Refugee

2.2.1. Ethnicity

The ethnic group and its derivatives such as ethnicity and ethnic identity are central to the conception of contested citizenship. Integration of refugees into the host economy has become a major policy challenge in recent years. A prominent concern among policymakers is that refugee settlement in locations with high concentrations of co-ethnics or kinships increase integration (Martén, et al, 2019).

According to the primordialist approach to ethnicity, *the fundamental cultural differences* and *divergent values* between ethnic groups inevitably results in a 'clash of cultures' and the emergence of ethnic violence that can lead to a war (Rüegger, 2018). However, constructionist approach to ethnicity stated that ethnicity is socially constructed. It is made through social interaction, by both elites and ordinary people.

Constructionist approach further stated that discursive formations, or cultural systems, intrinsically result in the construction of ethnic difference, as they portray culture as an unchanging force central to the construction of ethnicity. It suggested that marginalized members of ethnic groups contest existing ethnic identities, thereby constructing new ones, which, in turn, can result in retaliatory violence from those elites who benefited from the previous form of ethnic identity. Optionally, marginal ethnic group members may also employ violence aimed at other ethnic groups, which helps them gain increasing acceptance from established members of their own ethnic group (Rüegger, 2018).

Constructionist approach also stated that discursive formations, or cultural systems, intrinsically result in the construction of ethnic difference, as they portray culture as an unchanging force central to the construction of ethnicity. With regard to ethnic conflict, the constructionist approach focuses on the capacity of dialogue or exchanging ideas to influence members of one ethnic group to view members of another as natural target of violence (Rüegger, 2018). Finally, constructionist approach (cited in Eriksen, 2002) stated the role of broad *social, political* and *economic forces* in the construction of ethnicity, which is preoccupied with the processes of ethno-genesis, or the process leading to the emergence of ethnicity. Ethno-genesis is the process that is, often, linked to colonialism, globalization, modernity/modernization, nationalism and the formation of the 'nation state'. Wetherell (2010) described that identity, being innate and persistent, is being systematically challenged. Contemporary studies of identity are increasingly pointing to its multi-faceted and fragmented nature. Dagnino (2005) provided a comprehensive analysis of the rise of citizenship in Latin America, illustrating how identity politics, particularly through 'Black' and indigenous movements, have significantly influenced the redefinition of citizenship.

2.2.1.1. Integration

Since the end of World War II, millions of immigrants from developing countries have settled in Western Europe, as immigration and issues related to the integration of these settlers have become highly salient political issues in Europe over the past six decades. During the postwar recovery, many European countries began to import temporary labor or workers who initially came from Southern Europe and later from former colonies and other developing countries. With the economic slowdown of the early 1970s, most European countries stopped importing labor. As a result, many of the temporary workers settled permanently, and owing to family reunification and asylum policies, and large flows of immigrants and asylum seekers continued to enter Europe as reunifying immigrants (Givens, 2017).

There is also an overwhelming consensus that having citizenship has positive effects on immigrant political and economic integration, while evidence that citizenship causes socio cultural integration is more mixed. So, while the stakes of getting citizenship and the politics that make citizenship available (or not) are immensely consequential for economic and political outcomes, we see the tenuous nature of belonging through the contingent relationship between bearing a passport and social inclusion, *the integration* (Goodman, 2023).

Economic integration is measured through wages, occupational status, or labor market mobility. Research conducted in the Netherlands shows a positive effect of citizenship on employment (Peters et al. 2018), even that the probability of employment increases leading up to citizenship “anticipating naturalization”.

Political integration is measured by participation, efficacy, and political knowledge. However, this should not to be confused with legal integration, which is formal status acquisition, though naturalization is certainly a political process, since we know these are distinct because evidence from both the United States (Bueker, 2021) and France (Carrillo, 2015) shows that the desire to participate politically is often what motivates immigrants to naturalize.

Social integration is a broad category that may range from connection to the national group, to social contacts, and to language proficiency, the latter of which has been shown in the German case to positively influence national identification (Hochman & Davidov, 2014). This mixed picture reflects the soft side of citizenship as membership in a political community, where one may be a member by law but not in practice. For instance, Ersanilli & Koopmans (2010) found that “naturalization is positively associated with socio-cultural integration only in those countries like France and Germany that have traditionally required a certain degree of cultural assimilation from their new citizens,” a finding corroborated by evidence from the early-twentieth-century United States (Fouka, 2019).

Migration is a natural phenomenon in the history of mankind. Throughout centuries, people have been on the move within Europe as well as to and from Europe. This has been important for the progress and benefit of each individual and society as a whole. The European Union (EU) has received wide public support by overcoming national borders as dividing lines, creating an area of free movement of persons and even lifting border controls under the Schengen Agreement. Integration of migrants has therefore become a cornerstone of building stable and prosperous societies and nations. Thus, failures in the refugee integration lead to human suffering, fractured societies with social, economic and political instability (Hajdukovic, 2023).

Within the immigration process; there is a distinction between the assimilation, integration, and inclusion of migrants and refugees. Assimilation describes the process, in which migrants and refugees are the only ones that need to adapt to existing norms, behaviors, values and the culture of the host country and therefore become similar to the native majority. *Integration* on the other side is defined as a “two-way” street, where all members of society find common ground and make compromises but critics say that this is only theoretical and that the burden is most often placed only on the refugees and migrants. Inclusion therefore implies that all members of the society have the opportunity to participate in social, cultural and political life and encourages a sense of togetherness.

The term “integration”, thus, was used in a broader way, which implies inclusive participation coming from both sides, along the lines of the definition used by the UNHCR with regard to the integration of refugees: a dynamic and multi-faceted two-way process leading to full and equal membership in society. This includes preparedness by refugee communities to adapt to host societies without giving up cultural identity, and the receiving communities and institutions equally ready to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population. Nevertheless, the process is complex and gradual, comprising legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions

(Hajdukovic, 2023). It's interesting to note that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the EU adopted two definitions sharing common features: the term integration would identify a dynamic process of mutual adaptation where both migrants and host societies bear some responsibilities in its fulfillment. This understanding of the concept has informed all the policies of the European Commission on the subject, including the recent Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (Hajdukovic, 2023). The lack of integration of migrants and refugees does not only lead to social, economic, and psychological problems of the persons arriving in a new country, but also to the loss of income taxes and contributions to the pension and social security due to poor integration in the labor market. Furthermore, it leads to fragmented societies and political instability (Hajdukovic, 2023).

In recent years, governments across various nations have directed their attention towards issues of migration and integration, alongside the emergence of the right-wing populist movements. These movements have employed dehumanizing and detrimental narratives that increasingly permeate media, public discourse, and political agendas. Such rhetoric and policies that criminalize and dehumanize migrants and refugees effectively marginalize them within society. That is why it is essential to ensure successful integration of migrants and refugees in all Council of Europe member States and to focus on the benefits to all parties involved in that process. The assimilationist approach to integration policy has been widely criticized, given that it would annihilate (crush, conquer) the identities of minorities such as native citizens or minority immigrants (Hajdukovic, 2023). Finally, multiculturalism is sometimes cited as an approach to integration as opposed to assimilation. It promotes the integration of migrants in society, while advocating the preservation of their cultural identities. This approach has been criticized because it would encourage migrants' segregation rather than fostering the cohesion among different communities in society (Hajdukovic, 2023).

3. Methodological Approach

This article examines the contentious issue of citizenship in Gambela region of Ethiopia. The research employed a qualitative methodology, primarily utilizing document analysis of existing secondary sources, including conceptual, theoretical, and empirical literature. A qualitative approach is designed to explore and comprehend the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to social or human phenomena. This methodology encompasses a range of exploratory inquiries and processes that lead to a flexible and customized final report structure, utilizing inductive reasoning, emphasizing personal viewpoints, and striving to capture the complex subtleties of specific contexts (Creswell, 2018). Document analysis, as a qualitative research method, entails the assessment of both electronic and physical documents to interpret their content, enhance understanding of their implications, and build upon the insights they offer (Creswell, 2014). In this article, secondary data were scrutinized through document analysis, employing narrative and descriptive techniques after identifying patterns within the data, extracting pertinent information, and assessing its relevance to the central questions of the article.

4. Discussion

4.1. Contested Citizenship: The Legitimacy of Belongingness

Regassa (2010) notes that Sudan has been embroiled in a protracted civil war with the South since 1955, with a brief interlude from (1972 to 1983), significantly impacting the border regions. In a parallel situation, the Gambela region of Ethiopia has been accommodating several hundred thousand refugees escaping the conflict in Sudan for nearly seventy years. By the 1980s, Ethiopia's policy towards refugees had shifted towards encampment, with services and support provided in fixed locations and refugees' freedom of movement theoretically was limited to camps. However, such an approach was premised on being able to distinguish clearly between refugees and local peoples, something that has rarely been possible in Gambela, particularly among populations that speak the same language. During this period, the Ethiopian government made no concerted efforts to facilitate the naturalization of refugees into citizens. The absence of governmental initiatives to address refugee citizenship can be attributed to the fact that many refugees have become Ethiopian citizens informally through their kin ties. So determining who is citizen and who is not has been question for decades, and citizenship status has been exploited by some politicians to secure a greater share of regional resources.

Carver, Fana, and Naish (2020) further assert that refugees have become intricately involved in the political landscape of Gambela region, with many participating informally in the regional civil service. This situation mirrors findings by Hunter (2016), who stated that there have been new forms of contested citizenship resonated in some other African countries. In Ethiopia context, the contestation of citizenship along ethnic lines is both a manifestation and aggravating factors of the festering legitimacy crisis that has been eroding in Gambela region. This shows that the process of restructuring Ethiopia into federation has heightened ethnic competition among various ethnic groups. Given the primacy of ethnicity, it is only to be expected that ethnic mobilization including refugees for inclusion or integration is a major part of the new politics of citizen movements that arose to renegotiate solidarity or belongingness. This illustrates the complexities surrounding the process of citizenship in Gambela.

4.2.The Role of Ethnicity in Facilitating Informal Integration of Refugees to Acquire Ethiopian Citizenship

The construction of ethnicity as a mobilizing force for collective identity and security in political advocacy underscores its significant role in the contentious nature of citizenship. It is by no means the only basis for contestation (race, gender, religion, class, and so on are other important bases) of citizenship. However, it is arguably the most potent challenge to national or universal citizenship in Africa (Horowitz, 2000). One primary reason for this is that ethnicity is deeply rooted in territorial claims that are often exclusivist and discriminatory, which stands in stark contrast to the egalitarian principles of citizenship that advocate for the equal treatment of all individuals regardless of their territorial origins. The territorial nature of ethnic claims can lead to the exclusion of individuals from outside groups from accessing citizenship rights within the same nation. A pertinent illustration of this phenomenon is observed in Ethiopia since 1991, where regionalism has historically marginalized so-called non-indigenes often referred to as migrants or settlers by denying them citizenship rights in their respective regions of residence.

The stratification and inequality of ethnic groups, coupled with the fact that ethnicity thrives on competition, make politicized ethnicity dangerous for citizenship. Ethnicity is a powerful ideology for mobilization, especially in cases where there is discrimination against members of the group by the state. Its intricate linkages to, and reinforcement by, other emotive constructs like religion and territoriality make it even more powerful. Donald Horowitz explains the strong appeal of ethnicity in terms of the fact that “group worth” is a focal point of both individual and group identity because self-worth or self-esteem tends to be calculated in terms of the esteem accorded the individual’s group (Horowitz, 2000).

Mozaffar (1995) provides a comprehensive analysis of the politicization of ethnic identity, characterizing it as a strategically rational action where political elites selectively activate specific ethnic markers to construct groups, articulate group interests, and mobilize collective efforts aimed at achieving political objectives. This phenomenon is illustrated by certain politicians who have urged the federal government to grant citizenship to refugees and to recognize their territorial claims over Gambela Region. It should be noted that dual citizen is not allowed in Ethiopia, the option of taking this nationality lies in the hands of the ‘awardee’. However, the legal framework remains ambiguous regarding whether this citizenship can be claimed after a period of inactivity or if there exists a defined timeframe for responding to the grant of nationality. Despite the clearly defined borders established by colonial powers, African nation-states grapple with the challenge of border control, a situation that also applies to Ethiopia. This predicament has adverse effects on the nation while simultaneously benefiting refugees and their kin communities in border regions (Aniche, Moyo and Nshimbi, 2021). The lax enforcement of border control measures fosters an environment conducive to informality, allowing refugees to navigate stringent host country policies through social networks that may not align with nation citizenship law. The circumstances in the Gambela region reflect similar instances of informal integration observed among Angolan refugees in Zambia comparable border contexts (Hansen, 1981). The prevailing informality surrounding citizenship acquisition for refugees challenges the established official policies, particularly in border regions where co-ethnic populations reside on both sides.

This phenomenon is evident in the establishment of refugee camps in areas characterized by historical ties, including kinship, marriage, and various forms of social and economic interactions. In the Somali region of Ethiopia, such ethnic similarities have fostered amicable relations between refugees and local communities (Vemuru et al., 2020). However, the massive influxes of refugees into Gambela region with the historical and cultural connections with the host communities have become a means of acquiring Ethiopian citizenship. This implies that the law and the formal processes within which to acquire citizenship is not follow and consequently, the traditional Ethiopian understanding of citizenship, which emphasizes on connection to one's ancestral land regardless of birthplace, is increasingly undermined by these informal citizenship acquisition processes.

4.3. The Implications of Informal Integration of Refugees in Gambela Region of Ethiopia

The informal integration of refugees poses significant challenges for Gambela region, particularly if not managed effectively. Scholars and policymakers are increasingly worried about the long-term implications of ongoing polarization and division, which threaten the region's stability and development. A primary concern is that such informal integration may exacerbate violence and conflict, especially in an environment marked by high ethnic tensions (Samuel, 2021). The substantial influx of refugees has intensified the contentious dynamics between the Anywaa and Nuer ethnic groups, leading to entrenched conflicts over demographic representation.

Historically, the Anywaa were the predominant ethnic group in Gambela until the mid-1980s; however, the arrival of large numbers of refugees following the second Sudanese civil war in 1983 and the South Sudan conflict in 2013 has significantly altered the region's demographic landscape (Meckelburg, 2007). The local communities, who advance a historical argument for political entitlement over the region, contest the census, and other official figures report every year arguing that some communities are not Ethiopian citizens. The increasing number of refugee population is giving Ethiopian Nuer community advantage to dominate the political positions and, leaving the other communities to feel a minority (Dereje, 2014). Furthermore, the entrenchment of identity politics has impeded the region's capacity to tackle urgent social and economic issues, including poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment.

Dereje (2011) argues that the intense focus on identity politics has frequently obstructed developmental efforts, as resources are diverted to meet the needs of particular groups instead of being directed towards the overarching aim of regional development. Consequently, refugees have significantly influenced the political dynamics, with various factions leveraging their presence to further their agendas. The potential consequences of this situation for the region's future are extensive and multifaceted. On one hand, it may promote a climate of inclusivity and diversity, enabling individuals to celebrate their cultural identities without fear of discrimination. However, it could result in the fragmentation of the region, as ethnic communities isolate themselves within their own territories, thereby creating a divided society. Such fragmentation may incite additional conflicts, as groups vie for power and seek to safeguard their interests. Moreover, the informal integration of refugees has impeded development by fostering an environment where meritocracy is compromised in favor of identity-based quotas. This has culminated in a scenario where individuals are selected for roles based on their identity rather than their qualifications, ultimately leading to a deficiency in expertise and competence in critical positions. Consequently, this decline in capability adversely affects the quality of governance and public services.

5. Conclusion

The question of who is a citizen and who is not is often fundamental in multi-ethnic states or multinational states, for that matter. In multinational states like Ethiopia, the possession of citizenship can mean different things to different groups, including political power and the ability to enjoy the rights of citizens, such as the right to residence, the right to work, owning property, owning land, acquiring education, being married, and so on, as well as the duties of citizens. In such countries, one of the important pillars of the existence of stable polities is a broad consensus on citizenship for all these highly divided societies. Multi-ethnic societies need some form of consensus over the question of who belongs to which ethnic group, and in particular, who is a citizen with access to full political, economic, social, and civic rights. The construction and transformation of these boundaries have consequences for the consolidation of multiculturalism and the stability of the polity.

Many hybrid societies like Ethiopia, where citizenship and ethnic membership are seriously intertwined, encounter problems regarding who could be a citizen of the country and how non-citizens constrained to live within the de facto national boundary of the country was legislatively accommodated to enjoy their individual and collective rights.

The complex nature of the citizenship question varies accordingly in many countries. With regards to the people of Gambela region, the situation presents itself with the fact that host and refugees shared so many similarities in term of kin and cultures. The law and the formal processes within which the law is implemented are mediated by the extra-legal social relations and politics that enable the actors involved to “operate outside the rules, to use rules, or abandon them, bend them, reinterpret them, side-step them, or replace them”.

Borders in Africa were made by colonial powers and posed serious challenge of controlling border areas and make the presence of state felt invisible. This problem couple with the lack of enforcing the supreme law of the land created a condition for the informality to thrive. Therefore, informality makes it easier for refugees to gain citizenship. This informal process of acquiring citizenship raised questions of loyalty and some local people even contested the citizenship of other community. In view of these findings, this article recommend policy that build on shared needs and interests between the refugees and host communities, strengthen institutions to tighten law that regulate refugees and create a situation to facilitate the formal naturalization of refugees according to the country constitution.

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